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SUBJECT: ULEMA COUNCIL: US MUST SUPPORT WHOMEVER IS LEGALLY ELECTED

¶1. SUMMARY: During their July 25 meeting, Council of Religious Scholars (Ulema Council) President Mawlawi Fazulhadi Shinwari told Ambassador Holbrooke Afghan Muslims had been very pleased with President Obama's Cairo speech, but added that many doubted there would be action behind the President's words. Shinwari sought assurances from SRAP Holbrooke the United States was not anti-Pashtun, and the United States would support Afghan anti-corruption efforts. He urged the United States to support all who were elected in a legal manner in the upcoming Presidential and Provincial Council elections, saying such support would help avoid future atrocities. Ambassador Holbrooke assured the gathered Ulema of the United States, intentions to assist all Afghans, including the Pashtun, in developing their country, and in the US' continued support for the elections process, anti-corruption efforts, and eventual Afghan-led reconciliation.

Obama Cairo Speech Very Well-Received, But Doubts Remain

¶2. Mawlawi Shinwari told Ambassador Holbrooke that Afghan Muslims had been very pleased with President Obama's Cairo speech. Many still had doubts, however, that action would back up the President's words. Ambassador Holbrooke assured Shinwari the President meant every word of what he had said in Cairo, and that the SRAP's presence in Afghanistan was proof of that renewed commitment.

U.S. Not Anti-Pashtun and Supports Elections

¶3. Mawlawi Shinwari said the Pashtuns of Afghanistan were the majority population in the country, and added that many believed the United States was against them because Americans believed all Pashtuns were Taliban. Ambassador Holbrooke replied the United States was absolutely not opposed to the Pashtun people, and those who said otherwise were spreading disinformation and trying to cause a war between U.S. forces and the Pashtuns. This remark was widely covered in the press. He told Shinwari the United States was committed to helping the Pashtuns fight their real enemy, the Taliban - that was why he was in Afghanistan, and at the Ulema Council.

¶4. Shinwari said Afghans were grateful for U.S. assistance, but needed more help to solve their problems. He noted the security situation in Afghanistan was declining as the Taliban sought to destabilize the nation before elections.

¶5. To counter Taliban violence, Shinwari said the United States should support the victor of the upcoming elections. Ambassador Holbrooke agreed with Shinwari about the importance of elections, noting U.S. support (money, troops, elections team, etc.), and assuring Shinwari the elections would take place on schedule.

U.S. Policy In Afghanistan Continues To Be Reviewed

¶6. Ambassador Holbrooke said the United States was continuing to review its policies and refocus support in four key areas: 1) Agricultural Development; 2) Anti-Narcotics efforts; 3) Reducing Civilian Casualties; and 4) Developing the Afghan National Police (ANP). He told Shinwari the United States had decided to remove poppy eradication from its anti-narcotics program, and would instead focus on interdiction and arresting drug traffickers. Shinwari pointed out that traffickers outside Afghanistan must be arrested to cut off support to the Taliban. Turning to civilian casualties, Ambassador Holbrooke said LTG McChrystal had changed the military's rules of engagement, and sharply reduced civilian casualties in the past months, despite the increased operations tempo in Kandahar and Helmand. Shinwari noted that while he had noticed the decrease in civilian casualties, innocent people were still dying, and asked Ambassador Holbrooke to do his best to reduce further those casualties. Mr. Mohammad Kassim Halimi said 16 members of his local community had recently been lost to coalition forces fire in an incident in Logar province. (Note: Post is investigating.)

¶7. Ambassador Holbrooke told Shinwari Secretary of State Clinton had laid out in a speech the previous week a revised U.S. policy on reconciliation. People who had fought for the Taliban should be invited back into society, so long as they rejected al Qaeda, laid down their weapons, and accepted the principles of the Afghan constitution. He added the U.S. government recognized the vast majority of Taliban were poor, uneducated, and had been misled into supporting the Taliban,

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and needed to be given options for improving their lives. Shinwari said an invitation to people who had been misled to rejoin Afghan society might be effective, since the Taliban were not a "pure" indigenous enemy, but instead took orders from outside the country.

Afghans To Take Lead On Reconciliation After Elections

¶8. Mr. Halimi, the chief of the administrative section of the Afghan Supreme Court, said he and the other members of the council hoped the United States would permit the next president to take the lead on reconciliation. He hoped there would not be a repeat of 2002 when President Karzai tried to initiate a reconciliation process, but was forced to end the program when then-Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld blocked the process. Ambassador Holbrooke said the U.S. completely agreed reconciliation should be Afghan-led, and international community supported. He said enough attention had not been paid to the matter due to the elections, but assured the council that would change after August 20. The U.S., he said, understands how important reconciliation is to Afghanistan, and will support the GIROA's efforts.

Corruption Leads Some Afghans To Support Taliban

¶9. Mr. Halimi also said he hoped there would be greater emphasis placed on anti-corruption. Shinwari agreed, saying some Afghans continued to support the Taliban because of the high incidence of corruption in the country. Afghanistan, he said, is totally dependent on the United States, and the people need the United States' support to battle corruption. He estimated that 95 percent of GIROA officials were corrupt (though he offered no specific evidence to support that claim). Ambassador Holbrooke told the council the United States would like to see the establishment of a large anti-corruption program.

Other Impediments to Peace

¶10. Mawlawi Pir Mohammad Rohani, dean of Kabul University during Taliban rule, told Ambassador Holbrooke there were two blocks to peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan: former communists, influence on the international community, and unrest in neighboring countries. He said former communists were giving local coalition commanders bad information in order to settle grudges with ex-mujahideen leading to ill-targeted raids and anger amongst Afghanistan,s religious leaders. He asked Ambassador Holbrooke to stop those raids, and reevaluate information obtained from ex-communists. Unrest in neighboring countries would also frustrate reconciliation, he said. Unless the world community devoted attention to problems in neighboring countries, Afghanistan would not find peace.

Possible Links To Moderate Islamic Universities

¶11. Ambassador Holbrooke asked council members for their views on the ability of moderate Islamic universities, such as al Azhar in Egypt, to combat the Taliban,s violent message. Two of the 12 members present had attended al Azhar. One of these, Mr. Halimi, said that while al Azhar's scholars could help address certain problems in the country by training more open-minded and moderate mullahs and religious scholars, it could not solve all of Afghanistan,s problems. He suggested the United States help GIROA establish itself as a strong and efficient government.

Message to President Karzai

¶12. Shinwari said that if he could give a message to President Karzai, it would be that Karzai was too kind. Karzai must not give assistance to bad people in an attempt to appease and co-opt them.

COMMENT

¶13. The council was animated by the importance of international support for the victor of elections, and an Afghan-led reconciliation process. Shinwari did not say why he thought the international community would not support freely elected representatives of the people, but may have been referring to a number of provincial council candidates (and potential Parliamentary candidates) with ties to militia and/or the Taliban. Some Afghans believe those candidates could be duly elected, and either not seated or opposed by

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the international community.
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